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ABSTRACT

This paper concerns the question of linguistic deficiency in the bilingual setting. The author believes that language is a uniquely human phenomenon developing mainly in response to maturation in the midst of confusing linguistic input, varying in style and language according to situation. However, there seems to be no reason to expect the bilingual setting to produce a condition of linguistic deficiency. A child may acquire two linguistic systems in a general sense, or a single system overlapping two languages. A working system can, nevertheless, be the result. The report includes a bibliography. (SK)

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The Question of Linguistic Deficiency In the Bilingual Setting[1]

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The Question of Linguistic Deficiency In the Bilingual Setting

In discussing the education of students who have essentially developed a tradition of poor performance in public schools, the obvious question is Why? And as the suggested explanations come forth, one area that is inevitably stressed is language. Remarks that are often heard are something like, "The reason why these children do not succeed is because they don't have the language skills." Such an answer could actually be a large portion of the truth as it may well be the case that these children do not have "the language skills" needed for the traditional schools in this country. The confusion arises when the expression "language skills" is interpreted. Language skill is an extremely complex notion and needs quite careful explanation and interpretation.

Further complicating this situation are those students who have been raised in a bilingual setting and possess a wide degree of language skill in two (or possibly more) languages. Again it may well be the case that these students do not possess the "language skill" needed for many of the public schools or, at least, the kind of language skill demanded by many schools. The problem that ensues from this is the generalization that this "lack of language skill" applies to both (or all) of the students' languages. From this develops an assumption that so-called bilingual children are actually more alingual or non-lingual (see John & Horner, 1971; Zintz, 1963). It is to this assumption that this paper is directed as well as to the general notion of linguistic deficiency.

Inadequate or under-developed skill in another language than your own is obviously a possibility. At least, it seems unchallenged that children and adults alike do not immediately gain native-like proficiency in a second language. And for those who have completely failed to go beyond a few greetings or reading comprehension, this fact is painfully clear. Logically then if there is such a thing as inadequate or underdeveloped skill in one language, then isn't it possible to have inadequate or underdeveloped skill in more than one language. Again this is obviously true unless one of those languages is your native language, and then the situation is anything but obvious.

The classic debate over this kind of question has concerned dialect variation rather than different languages. Labov (1970) has convincingly demonstrated that the linguistic deprivation assumption of Bereiter and Engelmann (1966) is unfounded. Labov's argument is based on a comparison of features of the linguistic system of "nonstandard Negro English" with features of the so-called "standard English" linguistic system. The essential point is that the variety of English represented as NNE (nonstandard Negro English) is a linguistic system, fully developed and fully capable but different in systematic ways from the linguistic system of standard English. Much of the reason for interpreting Black English to be an inadequate grasp of some other linguistic system is attributable to the method of interviewing or acquiring data for analysis. A reluctance to speak can easily be interpreted as a faulty language system as can an absence of "regular" vocabulary items for the same phenomenon

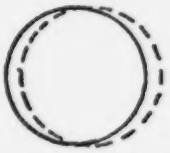
be interpreted as an underdeveloped lexical system. Again it is probably a safe assumption that any individual or group's vocabulary can be inefficient for functioning in a new environment or in unfamiliar situations; however, any conclusion that the lexical system is underdeveloped is unfounded. Unfamiliarity with the jargon of any specialized group is hardly sufficient to label people who find themselves in that situation as linguistically deficient or deprived in a general linguistic sense. Certainly you can label them as deficient in knowledge of a certain set of terms, but hardly as alingual or non-lingual. Their variety of language is different but not deficient.

Labov's pioneering work (along with the work of others: see Shuy, 1964; McDavid, 1968; Stewart, 1964; Baratz & Shuy, 1969; Fasold & Shuy, 1970; and two books of readings with extra bibliographies by Williams, 1970, and Shores, 1972) is important in having brought about a more positive attitude toward language diversity in the schools and has probably prevented considerable waste of human potential. This "different language" approach rather than "deficient language" approach is also applicable to some extent to the bilingual situation that is especially common in the Southwestern United States. Although it is somewhat doubtful that much agreement could be reached that a dialect variation in comparison to the standard dialect is the same phenomenon as a second language compared to a first language, this analogy is generally objected to for pedagogical or psychological reasons rather than strictly linguistic reasons (cf. Allen, 1970, and the following discussion). The point

here is the attitude that the linguist takes: neither the non-standard dialect nor the "other" language is considered inferior. Each is considered as a viable, useful, logical linguistic system rather than an inadequate imitation of the linguistic system of the standard variety. Such an approach would seem to necessitate viewing any consistent language production from the same point of view.

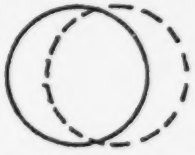
It seems quite logical and linguistically sound to approach the child from the bilingual setting in exactly the same way but with double the dialect situation. The child in the bilingual situation may well be confronted with the predicament that both of the linguistic systems he encounters and perhaps possesses are variations of a pair of standards. If it is a Spanish-English situation, the child may discover that the variety of Spanish he is familiar with is not the variety of the educated Spanish-speaker in his area nor is the English he is familiar with the variety of the educated English speaker. (This discussion has not yet brought up the complexity of what bilingualism is nor how it pertains to the question of linguistic deficiency, but is at this stage attempting to extend Labov's framework into bilingualism.) Any speaker's individual linguistic system is probably different from the group linguistic system or standard system by some degree. The amount of overlap then indicates the amount of similarity of one's idiolect and the target variety. The Black English speaker, for example, has much less overlap than does the often-referred-to middle class speaker. This notion of overlap can be simplistically illustrated with overlapping circles.

—— Black English
---- Standard English



—— Middle Class English
---- Standard English

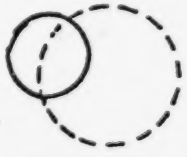
The solid line circle represents the individual speaker's idiolect or a group variety and the broken line circle represents the mythical standard English. Using this same approach, the bilingual speaker can also be represented but with two sets of overlapping circles.



—— Bilingual English
---- Standard English

—— Bilingual Spanish
--- Standard Local Spanish

Again these representations are simplistic in that no distinctions are made for the differing linguistic components of semantics, syntax, lexicon, and phonology (see Macnamara, 1967) nor the various domains of language use (see Mackey, 1968) nor language dominance (see Macnamara, 1967). These representations simply help demonstrate the complexity of the situation. If we represent the dimension of language dominance in a general sense, again ignoring linguistic components and domains, the situation may look more like one pair of overlapping, equal-sized circles and one pair of overlapping, unequal-sized circles.

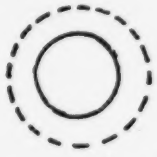


Bilingual English
Standard English

Bilingual Spanish
Standard Local Spanish

Obviously this illustrates a weaker language (English) that will still not be standard when and if it develops.

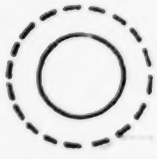
If still another dimension is added, the picture becomes even more complex. In an idealized situation (following Chomsky, 1965) a monolingual child's linguistic development could be represented as concentric circles. The size of the inner circle indicates the stage of development and the outer circle the idealized representation of the group language variety that the child is being raised in.



—— Child Language
----Group Standard Variety

The bilingual's developmental representation as an idealized speaker of two languages can also be viewed in the same manner. Following is such a representation with the idealized bilingual at unequal stages of development in his two languages.

—— Bilingual Child English
----Standard English



—— Bilingual Child Spanish
---Standard Local Spanish

Once the "idealized" aspect is removed and developmental circles are overlapping rather than concentric as in the earlier diagram and the individual linguistic components as well as the domains are represented, the situation is incredibly complex and almost defies illustration. It might even be the case that the

linguistic components of the two languages involved operate differently. For example, the semantic component might be a common circle for both languages while the syntactic component would be two circles. Nonetheless, this form of representation does provide a framework from which to look at the linguistic situation in a bilingual setting. It should be noted that these illustrations always assume presence of, at least, one linguistic system and do not imply the notion of children being non-linguistic. These diagrams are basically a set of assumptions that provide perspective for dealing with "divergent" language behavior.

There is still another possibility that might very well exist in the bilingual setting. This would be presence of a single system overlapping two languages, which can also be simplistically illustrated by the same method.

"Bilingual" Language
Standard Languages

Such a situation might exist for all components and domains, or it might exist only within a single component as mentioned earlier. The possibility of a single semantic system, somewhat different from the semantic system of either group of monolinguals is an especially interesting and revealing possibility (see Ervin, 1961; Young, 1971; Gumperz, 1972).

In general the linguistic situation is not simple and without a framework or perspective it can be erroneously interpreted.

The areas of overlap alone are often the basis of conclusions concerning a child's linguistic ability while the untapped area is ignored. Now with this perspective, the question of linguistic deficiency in the bilingual setting can be pursued further.

Still another dimension, which is equally important to this discussion, is the now well known distinction between competence and performance (Chomsky, 1965). Competence refers to the implicit knowledge any person has about his language. It has been represented as something like a set of rules which guide a speaker in the formulation of grammatically acceptable utterances. In linguistic terms competence can be referred to as the speaker's grammar. Performance, on the other hand, involves many other factors, such as the situation, the psychological state, and cultural restraints. Performance is what the speaker actually does with his language rather than what he implicitly knows about his language. It should be noted that the notion of competence has been extended to what is called communicative competence. Sociolinguists have felt that a speaker's knowledge of his language also includes rules concerning how and when to use language (see especially Hymes, 1968). Regardless of whether we view competence in the narrow, structure-of-the-language sense or in the broader structure-of-the-language-within-social-context sense, the distinction between competence and performance is necessary and useful.

The obvious difficulty in assessing "linguistic deficiency" is that all we have to work with is performance and what a

person does with his language is quite likely only the barest indicator of what a person can do with his language. Within a communicative competence sense, a speaker may be following cultural "rules" in remaining silent or in speaking with limited constructions. To interpret this as some kind of linguistic deficiency or inadequate grasp of language is to commit a serious error of assuming linguistic performance equals linguistic ability.

In investigating any linguistic situation, the competence-performance distinction is useful. The earlier illustrations, showing how an individual's language can be different from the standard by varying degrees, are basically illustrations of linguistic competence, not necessarily performance although some attention has to be paid to performance as well. This distinction is also necessary in the bilingual situation as there may be double the possibilities. The notion of communicative competence is also needed as social and cultural rules dictate which language is appropriate as well as how to use each.

With the addition of the competence-performance distinction, attention can now be more specific to children raised in a bilingual setting. It must now be assumed that the environment of these children is, indeed, one where two languages are frequently used by a majority of the speakers. The bilingual then is a person who uses two languages in his day-to-day living, a definition similar to Brooks's (1964). It must also be assumed that the children are in fairly regular contact with these

bilinguals in both active and passive roles. It is also probably safe to assume that some of the members of the child's home are bilinguals or at least that the home represents more than one language. The child will also be classified as a bilingual in that he, at least, passively uses more than one language in responding to those who address him in more than one language. A second general possibility is that the child's home might be almost entirely monolingual and that his contacts with the second language are incidental until school.

John and Horner (1971) review some of the pertinent literature and seem to take the stand that "being forced to learn in a second language too early may lead to intellectual impairment and academic retardation"(p. 171). Their position seems to apply to the child who is essentially monolingual upon beginning school unless "second language" can mean weaker language. If that is the case, then probably all the children described here would be included in that it is unlikely that these children are balanced bilinguals (cf. Macnamara, 1967). Such a position could be justifiable in that learning new material in a weaker language will be slower (Macnamara, 1966), although the St. Lambert experiment (Lambert and Tucker, 1972) seems to defy this conclusion. Nonetheless, it would seem to be difficult to keep up in a class if you could not accurately comprehend the teacher and the verbal exchange going on. However, this is not the question of concern here although closely related. Linguistic deficiency is the concern. Do these children somehow suffer linguistically from this kind of environment? The general

approach of those who claim definitely that there is a loss in linguistic ability in both languages or in language in general is based on the idea that there is confusion between languages for the child, resulting from the inability to keep the languages separate. An older documentation of children raised in a bilingual setting (Smith, 1935) kept track of the language performance of each of eight children and compared their performances at equivalent ages. Smith found shorter sentences, more usage errors, more mixed sentences, and a higher proportion of second language words for the younger children at any given age than the older children had demonstrated at the same age. Obviously this looks like some kind of linguistic deficiency that resulted from the sources of the two languages not being kept distinct for the younger children as it had been for the older children. The parents had become more bilingual during the years and the children had had more contact with bilingual children. A recent study reported that a child gained normal proficiency in two languages by keeping the sources distinct (Friedlander et al., 1972). These two studies would seem to suggest that keeping each language identified with a distinct source would prevent confusion between languages while mixed sources add to the confusion. This is an interesting point but the separation of domains or topics or situation could also help prevent confusion, and regardless of mixed sources it would be just as plausible to argue that the child, nonetheless, develops a linguistic system reflecting mixed sources and even a mixing of languages. Another interesting point comes from the Friedlander et al.

study; the bilingual child's source of the second language was exclusively the father whose linguistic input to the child was considerably less than that of the mother who was the source of the first language. This finding raises a substantial question about how much exposure is needed for normal linguistic development. The father deliberately directed the language to the child rather than incidentally exposing the child to the language, which might suggest that it is the type of exposure rather than the amount. Regardless, there is no reported linguistic deficiency in either language for this particular child. I would argue that this child has normally developed two systems while the younger children in the Smith study are more nearly developing a single system covering two languages, perhaps something like the distinction between compound and coordinate bilinguals (see Macnamara, 1967).

In continuing, there is no shortage of studies supporting either the position of linguistic deficiency or the position of normal linguistic development but of a different system. For example, Nedler and Sebera (1971) begin with the premise that the child's "proficiency in Spanish is often limited and he usually has little or no knowledge of English"(p. 260) in arguing for an intervention program. Their evidence was derived from the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test and general observations. They quite logically found that children improved in vocabulary when actively taught that vocabulary, but to use vocabulary from a specific test to imply a lack of language skill in general seems unjustifiable. Lack of familiarity with the

vocabulary and lack of experiences that would produce that kind of vocabulary can account for the same thing.

Jensen's (1962) review of the effects of childhood bilingualism seems overwhelmingly in support of linguistic deficiency--smaller active and passive vocabulary, shorter sentences, more incomplete sentences, fewer compound and complex sentences, fewer interrogative and more exclamatory sentences. If Jensen's conclusions are viewed from Labov's framework, as outlined earlier, one might wonder if the lack of interrogatives, for example, is more a problem of the investigator not recognizing the interrogative structure because of its different form. The use of shorter sentences may well be true and may well be part of the way of using language by the group rather than the inability to use longer sentences. What is likely is that these kinds of conclusions are based on examining that part of the child's linguistic system(s) that overlapswith the standard rather than the entire system. Or just as likely, the conclusion is simply that a bilingual has a weaker language and his performance in his weaker language is not equal to the performance of monolinguals of that language.

Braun and Klassen (1971) investigated two bilingual communities and compared the English (second language) of these groups with the English of a monolingual community on the length of T-units (Hunt, 1965), number of subordinate clauses, main clause patterns, and numbers of sentence combining transformations. They reported that the monolingual community was superior to the bilingual communities in English, a foregone conclusion.

A study by Ianco-Worrall (1972) provided evidence that children raised as bilinguals with distinct sources of the languages were two to three years advanced in semantic development. Semantic development was measured by the degree of realization of the symbolic function of words, the realization that words are not aspects of things but arbitrary symbols of things. Another study is noteworthy here. Howard, Hoops, and McKinnon (1970), after deviating from their testing instruments, came to the conclusion concerning dialect variation that children from higher socioeconomic status were not different from low socioeconomic children in their ability to comprehend speech even though such a difference was statistically evident with the standardized instruments.

Even the situations where linguistic deficiency should be obvious, the evidence is still not that clear. Hoemann (1972) compared deaf and hearing children and concluded that deafness is a handicap in peer-to-peer communication, when the communication required explicitness and familiarity with particular ways of communicating. However, Hoemann also found that some of the deaf children were as good as the hearing children and that with considerable training the deaf in general were as good as the hearing. This latter point seems to indicate that a system was available, but that what was needed was practice in how to use the system. A third point from Hoemann is also significant; he claimed that he could not generalize from his data because social and informal communication was easily handled by the deaf, which also seems to indicate that a system

was available and that what the children need is training and practice in how to use the system.

The situation with the bilingual child could easily be the same thing. The child might need help in learning how to use his linguistic system in unfamiliar situations, which in no way indicates the absence of a system or an underdeveloped system. In fact, without a linguistic system, available training would be incredibly unproductive. The research is anything but clear and there is obviously a definite need for an approach to determine whether there can be such a thing as linguistic deficiency in the bilingual setting or any setting. Linguistic deficiency, if it does exist, is no minor concern. There seems to be some concensus that language is a necessity for higher levels of thinking. Vygotsky (1962), who theorizes separate origins for language and thought, states that language determines the development of thought. However, Vygotsky seems to be stressing an undescribed inner speech or perhaps symbolic system. At least, he does not stress any priority of a certain variety of language. But to return to the point, what is needed is a means whereby linguistic deficiency could be determined. It is here that current linguistic theory might offer a suggestion. As the role of semantics has become progressively more integral to linguistic theory (see Lakoff and Ross, 1967; Lakoff, 1968; and McCawley, 1967, 1968a, 1968b), its role in examining language function has also grown. Bloom (1970) provided a convincing illustration of how the form of language may not truly reveal the function of language. She worked with very young children

and depended on situational context to interpret meanings rather than attempting to interpret such strictly from the linguistic form. Adjacent nouns could signal various functions such as conjunction, attributive, possession, location, and subject-object relation. Although this is a study in monolingual language development, it is significant here in pointing out the child's ability to express semantic relationships somewhat regardless of form. Kernan (1969) analyzed the speech of a young Samoan boy in a similar fashion, based on the case grammar of Fillmore (1968). Kernan's semantic categories included verb + agent, verb + object, verb + direction, possession, labeling, location, and benefit. His grammatical analysis seemed to support this kind of approach. It is this kind of analysis that I believe will provide a way to come to grips with a child's linguistic skill at a level of competence. The questions to be asked are whether the child can express semantic relations such as possession or locative or modification. Can the child indicate that something belongs to him or somebody else (possession)? Can the child indicate where something is (locative)? Can the child indicate that something causes something else to happen (causal)? Can the child indicate that one action is dependent on the outcome of another action (conditional)? Can the child deny these relations (negation)? Can the child question these relations (interrogative)? The point is that if there is linguistic deficiency, it will be revealed by the inability to express or understand these kinds of relationships within the level of development rather than the use

of shorter sentences or the length of T-units or the number of interference "errors" or structures different from adult or standard structures. The question of linguistic deficiency in its crucial sense should be assessed by analysis of the semantic component of language, very likely the central component.

Kessler (1971) compared the syntactic development in both languages of bilingual children. She approached her analysis within a case grammar framework although her concern was syntax, which she found to be approximately equivalent in both languages. Significant is the common or equivalent semantic system serving as the base for the syntactic analysis. Obviously these children could express basic semantic relationships and apparently could express them in more than one language.

A final study comparing surface syntax of pre-school Spanish-American children (Brisk, 1972) provides something of a test of this theory. The children in Brisk's study would be classified as bilinguals according to the definition used here although Brisk only looked at the children's Spanish. One facet of Brisk's study was to compare the Spanish only of rural and urban children. She found that the groups differed substantially, especially on the number of structures used by each group. The rural children seemed to be more developed than the urban group in the variety of structures being used. For example, both groups used adverb of manner frequently but only the rural group used the adverbial phrase of manner. Semantically both groups seem able to express this kind of modality. The difference

seems to lie in the facility of one group to vary the form of a certain kind of meaning. If this data is viewed from an assumption that the children from both of these groups had a roughly equivalent, incomplete grasp of English according to developmental expectations, then a conclusion that the urban group is linguistically poorer than the rural group is natural. But if both groups can express approximately the same kinds of meanings, then the linguistic poverty is not in the basic linguistic structure but in how the structure is used. It is quite possible that the urban setting superimposes restraints on how much of the time Spanish is to be used and that the "poverty" is a requirement for group membership. Bernstein (1970) discusses an elaborated code and a restricted code which characterize social class. Lower class children use a restricted code while middle class children use both. This distinction, which is one of performance not competence, may apply to the situation described by Brisk. There may be a linguistic deficiency in regularly using a structure but not in the capacity of being able to use it. The basic and significant aspect of linguistic skill is still the ability to express basic semantic relations.

In general and in conclusion, language is a uniquely human phenomenon developing mainly in response to maturation in the midst of confusing linguistic input, varying in style and language according to situation. There seems no reason to expect the bilingual setting to produce a condition of linguistic deficiency. The child may acquire two linguistic systems in a general sense

or he may acquire a single system overlapping two languages, but he will, nonetheless. put together a system. It is probably true that some children are deficient in experiences and vocabulary needed for public education and it probably true that some children are deficient in the linguistic system expected for school. It is also probably true that some children are linguistically deficient in being familiar with ways to use their language or are deficient in that their ways of using their language are different from the expected ways. But it is probably equally untrue to claim that children are deficient linguistically if they have a linguistic system that can accommodate basically the same kinds of meanings that any linguistic system can and that can expand to accommodate unaccustomed uses and even forbidden uses. The basic question in linguistic deficiency is whether the child can express a specific kind of meaning rather than whether he has a repertoire of stylistic variations, something that can be added as long as there is an underlying linguistic system.

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